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A quick reference aid on U.S. foreign relations
Not a comprehensive policy statement
Bureau of Public Affairs • Department of State

US-Argentine Relations

March 1986

Background: Argentina is the second largest country in the Southern Hemisphere, after Brazil, and the eighth largest in the world. Its population is 97% European, primarily descendants of Spanish and Italian immigrants but including British and other European strains. The Indian population, estimated at 50,000, is concentrated in the peripheral provinces of the north, northwest, and south. Eighty percent of the population live in urban areas, with more than one-third of them in the metropolitan area of the capital, Buenos Aires. Seven years of education is compulsory; 94% of the 30 million Argentines are literate.

The country's topography ranges from subtropical lowlands in the north to the towering Andes in the west and the bleak, windswept Patagonian steppe and Tierra del Fuego in the south. Argentina's heartland is in the rich temperate plains, known as the pampas, in the east central part of the country. This is some of the finest farmland in the world, producing large quantities of wheat, corn, sorghum, and sunflower seeds and providing year-round pasturage for Argentina's important cattle industry. Argentina is one of the largest exporters of foodstuffs in the world.

Consolidation of democracy: Argentina is now well into its third year of democratic civilian government. The November 1983 election of President Alfonsin marked the end of 7 years of military rule, and the cause of representative government was given a boost by the mid-term November 1985 congressional elections. Since assuming office, President Alfonsin has begun dealing with the legacy of human rights problems left by military rule. At the public civil court trial of nine former governing junta members, five were sentenced and four acquitted. The Alfonsin government is seeking to develop a role for the armed services consistent with Argentine defense needs and civilian control.

Economic and debt issues: Argentina, traditionally one of Latin America's most prosperous countries, is in the midst of a new economic program designed to cure its serious inflationary problems and lay the groundwork for future economic growth. The Austral Plan, named for the new Argentine currency, has been successful in cutting the inflation rate from a monthly 30% to 2%-3% per month. The government is beginning to move forward on structural changes designed to ensure economic expansion. Argentina maintains a responsible position in dealing with its $50 billion external debt, refusing to join those calling for either outright repudiation or arbitrary limits on debt payments. US and Argentine officials meet frequently on economic and commercial matters.

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Foreign policy issues: The democratic Government of Argentina has pursued a balanced foreign policy, and its international positions have coincided with US positions in a number of major areas. The moderation of Argentine foreign policy is reflected in its search for a peaceful solution to the dispute with the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands (known in Argentina as the Islas Malvinas). We have supported the Argentine resolutions on this issue at the UN General Assembly for the past 4 years. Argentina also has joined with Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru in the Contadora Support Group, which seeks to aid the Contadora peace process in Central America.

Nuclear issues: Argentina has the most advanced nuclear program in Latin America. Significant portions of that program are not under international safeguards. Argentina has signed the Treaty of Tlatelolco, a hemispheric nonproliferation accord, but has not put it into effect. Despite its insistence on safeguards agreements for its exports, Argentina has declined to adopt full-scope safeguards for its national nuclear program. International concern about the lack of safeguards is lessened by President Alfonsin's personal commitment to the peaceful development of nuclear energy, evident in his recent overture to Brazil on nuclear cooperation, his establishment of civilian control over the previously military-dominated program, and his drastic slashing of the nuclear budget.

US policy objectives: An economically strong and politically pluralistic Argentina is in the US interest. Our policy objectives toward Argentina are designed to:

- Maintain friendly relations;

- Support the consolidation of democratic institutions;

- Assure maximum cooperation between the two countries; and

- Resolve any differences in the spirit of mutual respect and hemispheric understanding.

US-Argentine relations are cordial and cooperative and involve daily official and private contacts at all governmental, business, social, and cultural levels. Based on a shared respect for democracy, ties have strengthened since the return of democratic government to Argentina in December 1983. Reflective of this renewed warmth was President Alfonsin's successful March 1985 visit to the US.

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